



INDEPENDENCE DAY RAGE:

A VICTIM'S TALE

On 4 July 2001, **Kristen L. Skogrand** was a passenger on Lufthansa Flight DLH 449 from Phoenix to Frankfurt. What should have been a pleasant Independence Day flight turned into a nightmare in which he became a victim of air rage. **Philip Baum** ascertains Skogrand's view as to just how this incident turned violent resulting in a flight diversion, litigation and lifelong injury.

What was your own state of mind that day?

I was in a good mood. My two daughters live in Oslo, while I spend much of my time in the United States. Supposedly only hours away from having quality time with them was, as always, exciting.

Where were you seated?

In 37K, an aisle seat in coach class, with the assailant, Gheorghe Coroian, occupying the seat in front of me. The Airbus 340-300 carried only 114 passen-

gers and 14 crew that evening.

When did you first become aware of the fact that an incident was brewing?

I had already taken my seat when Coroian boarded. As a million-mile flier, used to observing my fellow passengers, I instantly noticed his restless behaviour. He hid a plastic bag next to his seat; it contained a whisky bottle, and played a significant role in the violent scenario that followed.

Once airborne, Coroian ordered a beer. The crew served him substantial

amounts, while he doubled up using his own liquor. Although he gradually turned more abrasive, the flight attendants kept serving him alcoholic beverages.

After dinner, I went to the rear galley and suggested to a female crewmember that it would be wise to stop serving him alcohol. I informed her about the liquor he had brought on board, told her exactly where it was hidden and expressed concern that Coroian's aggressive behaviour could escalate. The stewardess was polite, thanked me for the warning, and immediately called the Purser.

How did the Purser respond?

Accompanied by the stewardess, the Purser told Coroian that he would not be given any more alcohol. He also said that he knew Coroian had his own liquor bottle and that he had to confiscate it. Coroian denied having one. The Purser carried out a very superficial search, missing the spot where I had told them the bottle was hidden.

When Coroian drank from the whisky bottle again 15-20 minutes later, the lady across the aisle from him saw it. Coroian realised that she was observing him and he started threatening her, even though her 7 or 8-year old son was seated next to her. I went back to the stewardess a second time and told her that without proper intervention someone would most likely get hurt.

Did any other passengers respond?

I told the passenger across the aisle from me, Richard Lessard, that since the crew had done nothing, the least we could do was to attempt to de-escalate the situation in a non-confrontational manner to protect the female passenger. He agreed. I told him that I would simply stand next to Coroian's seat, hoping that this would deter further threats against the woman. I asked Lessard if he would stand behind me in the aisle as an extra precaution. He accepted.

How did your interaction with Coroian commence?

I stood next to Coroian for about 3 minutes. He paid no attention to me. Instead, his behaviour made me fear that violence was about to erupt with the innocent lady still on the receiving end. I therefore briefly addressed Coroian in a non-combative manner. He stared at me, but did not respond verbally. After about a minute, he abruptly undid his seatbelt while still aiming threats at his female co-passenger. I hurried back to the stewardess again and told her to inform the Purser that intervention had to occur immediately in order to prevent

injury to passengers.

As I returned to my seat, Coroian jumped into the aisle and told me, "I am going to injure you". I remained calm, and informed him that I did not want any problems. When the Purser arrived, I finally got up and told him that Coroian had threatened the lady. I pleaded for increased protection and re-seating. Two witnesses also told the Purser at this time that they had overheard Coroian's promise to injure me.

How well equipped were the crew to respond?

According to Lufthansa representatives, this was allegedly the Purser's last flight before retirement. As far as I can recall, he was quite sturdy and well into his fifties. In addition, I believe there were another 4 or 5 male crewmembers on board. The rest were female attendants. To the best of my recollection, they all ranged between their late twenties and early forties. Four male Lufthansa pilot students also volunteered to help after the initial assault. The Purser utilised their assistance and put some of them in critical positions they handled poorly, according to witnesses.

As for the crewmembers' collective capability to handle the situation, witness statements and the FAA investigations confirm the same impression I have: they were almost completely incapable of intervening action. They resembled paralysed spectators rather than proactive responders to a clearly forewarned and foreseeable crisis.

We had repeatedly alarmed the crewmembers about the likelihood of violent acts, and specifically told the Purser that Coroian had promised to injure me. Rather than heeding my plea for protection and re-seating, he instead asked me to sit down and put my seatbelt on. In my world, you do listen to and obey the crew! Relieved for a moment, thinking that the Purser would move Coroian to another area with less people, I breathed a sigh of relief.

However, we then heard the Purser

order Coroian back to his seat as well. The Purser then swiftly left the scene.

When did Coroian turn violent?

Coroian kept his promise 30 seconds later! He jumped up from his seat and shouted "Why don't you calm down!" I responded with a simple, "I am completely calm sir. I am sitting down and even have my seatbelt on." The last thing I heard as I tried to undo my seatbelt was Coroian saying, "Taste this..." Within the next couple of seconds, my eyesight was damaged for life, along with additional injuries. He had punched me twice in the face in a downward angle with his fist - fortified with several big gold rings. I attempted to get my seatbelt off, but didn't succeed in time. Instead, Richard Lessard jumped in and pushed Coroian away. His resolute action most likely prevented further injuries during the initial assault.

Do you think Coroian could have been calmed down?

Removing him from the area of tension would have been an obvious initiative. The crew had the power and plenty of space available, but failed to do so.

Next, the Purser should have confiscated the whisky bottle as soon as I made the crew aware of where it was hidden. The bottle was confiscated only after Coroian had already caused injury and serious trauma.

I also believe firmer verbal (and potentially written) warnings with believable consequences should have been given. Instead, the crew completely relinquished control to the assailant, with crewmembers' and passengers' well-being hanging in the balance. Ultimately, I believe Coroian should have been restrained.

What was the reaction of other passengers as the incident developed?

We saw quite a typical scenario emerge during the crisis. Threatened passengers took a proactive stand. The "don't-bother-me" crowd remained silent observers, many of them not even

**Facing page: After the horrific attack
(Photo by Kristen L. Skogrand)**



Before and **after** the attack
Top: Photographer: Helen Furu
Bottom: Photographer: Thomas Andreassen, Copyright: Scanpix

aware of what was going on, or unwilling to get involved. Finally, we saw the typical few that vocally expressed their disliking of the incident, indiscriminately shouting "shut up" and other commands both to helpers and the assailant. They probably had no real understanding of the gravity of the situation.

What have other passengers said about the crew's behaviour?

In brief, their behaviour has been described as shockingly passive; irresponsible; no effective intervention; lack of responsiveness to pleas from threatened passengers, and, astonishing, neglectful of my need for extra protection, especially after the serious injuries I sustained during the first attack. These opinions have been echoed by many of the world's leading experts in relevant crisis management fields as well.

The airline's insurance company has attempted to portray what happened on Flight DLH 449 as a mere passenger-to-passenger quarrel. It was as far from this as any violent encounter could ever be.

What happened after you had been attacked?

After the initial assault, I once more asked the Purser for re-seating. I got a seat in the near-empty rear section of Business Class, where I lay down with ice on my face. The crew reassured me that I would be safe. The Purser showed me that he had handcuffs available, but refused to use them. Instead, he promised to place "guards" around Coroian, thus preventing him from leaving his seat. This strategy failed completely. Coroian roamed around at his own choosing, again as confirmed by witnesses.

Twenty minutes later, I suddenly felt that something was seriously wrong. As I removed the ice from my face I realised that Coroian was standing over me, ready to charge again. I somehow jumped up, twisting my ankle in the process. Chased by Coroian, I managed to limp backwards in the aircraft. Merely 20 feet behind the curtains that separat-

ed Business Class from the coach cabin, I was stunned to see 5 or 6 male Lufthansa representatives just standing there, anxiously staring towards the section I had emerged from. They saw Coroian charge into the area I was in, yet did nothing to stop him.

The crew apologised, told me to go back to Business Class and tend to my injuries.

About ten minutes later exactly the same thing happened again. Coroian charged at me for the 3rd time on the same flight. These charges gravely compounded not only the physical injuries, but also the trauma of the incident. Anxiety took over on my part. Even following this serious escalation, Coroian still kept moving around the aircraft.

What injuries did you sustain?

Permanently damaged eyesight, which cannot be repaired surgically. Dramatically reduced ability to process balance signals, causing severe vertigo problems. Loss of much of the strength, function and sensation in my left arm and hand. Closed-head injury resulting in severe daily headaches. Debilitating neck and back pain due to ligament injury and spinal problems. An injured right ankle.

What injuries did other passengers receive?

Lessard's daughter, 10 years old at the time, remained within a couple of yards of Coroian until law enforcement officers removed him from the plane. Coroian repeatedly threatened her father right in front of her. She got physically ill and almost vomited onboard. Mr. Lessard and I pleaded with the Purser and crewmembers to provide alternate seating, at least for the little girl and Ms. Lessard. The crew refused, and the girl got so traumatized that she couldn't sleep in a room of her own for months following the flight.

How was your assailant eventually restrained?

He was neither restrained nor effectively

controlled at all until law enforcement officers took him away after we landed.

How did the crew react towards you after the incident until landing?

They were polite and apologetic. The Purser even kept me abreast of some of Coroian's continuing violations, amongst others that he had tried to smoke on board after the initial assault.

Did the aircraft divert?

We diverted to Boston's Logan International Airport between 1.5 to 2 hours after the initial assault.

What was the effect on you after the incident?

In addition to the effects of the physical injuries: Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), resulting in depression and severe anxiety, nightmares, inability to sleep, intrusive recollections, absentmindedness; and distancing from many important relationships. Reduced memory retention and cognitive function. Severe anxiety, with its typical emotional toll and destructive consequences. Significant financial losses and inability to perform income-generating work necessary to sustain realistic life essentials, and a wife and two daughters gravely affected by the life-altering changes their husband and father involuntarily encountered.

How did the airline respond in the aftermath of the incident?

After first publicly admitting to the largest newspaper in Norway (VG) that my version of what took place on board was correct based on written crewmember reports, the airline displayed an infrastructure of concealment, and attempts at displaying their handling as professional, swift, and picture-perfect. This type of damage control and diversionary efforts stunned witnesses, and had a re-traumatizing effect on me.

Although left alone at the hospital and then in the dark streets of Boston when released from the hospital at approximately 3am the night before, the

Lufthansa representative who cared for me the day after the incident was warm and fantastically caring. This in stark contrast to the treatment I received once the airline realised that they would be held responsible for their in-flight neglect.

This goes to the core issue of corporate policy and values, plus the airline's crewmember training. Nonetheless, honesty simply comes down to right or wrong, not a matter of policy. The results of the crew's handling during the flight, and the airline's responses thereafter, really speak for themselves. Correcting what's wrong ought to be the number one priority here. Personally, I am not seeking revenge, only justice. Sadly enough, denial and diversions that even go against what independent witnesses have emphatically stated seem to be the avenue of choice on the part of the airline.

What happened to Coroian afterwards?

He posted bail the next day and tried to flee the U.S. The police picked him up at Logan International Airport, and he spent another 14 days in jail. Then he made a plea bargain with the judge, received a 5-month suspended sentence, and 6 months probation. The Federal Aviation Administration thoroughly investigated the incident, however, and imposed a USD \$35,000 civil penalty on him. The U.S. Department of Justice decided to follow through with actual collection of the penalty. Today, Gheorghe Coroian has gone into hiding in order evade service.

What lessons do you think can be learned from your experience?

A delayed and uneducated response to imminent and even forewarned threats is a potentially lethal mix. The only valid formula is early detection backed by rapid and measured intervention. The outcome of my experience shows that no collective, coordinated set of efforts and procedures were successfully applied.

Once you know that serious violent threats have occurred onboard, you neither leave the scene nor leave it up to

the threatened passenger(s) to handle the conflict alone. If possible, as in my case, you either remove the threatened individuals, or the perpetrator, from the area of tension. If you know that the Tax-Free Syndrome is at play, with a passenger consuming his or her own alcohol during a flight, you don't treat the challenge casually. Instead, you persist until the opened bottle has been confiscated, not only because of excessive consump-

tant training aspects that remain in the forefront of the efforts I launched when I established the Safe Flier Foundation and did research for my book after the misadventure are:

1. We must bring renewed focus on the human factor in our crewmember training. Technical reinforcements, human empowerment and real-life training need to go hand in hand. If not, the bad guys

instantaneous use on a second's notice, without hesitation and paralysing fear.

4. In lieu of the above, it's important to realise that the aisle can never be turned into a "Kung-Fu arena". We can, however, teach crewmembers a liability-conscious yet effective compliance, self-protection and last-resort conflict diffusion system that allows them to escalate or de-escalate the level of force based on the situation at hand. This is possible while simultaneously ensuring minimal risk of injury to the restrainers as well as those being restrained.

5. Effective passenger restraint skills require restraint tools that are safe and effective, and crewmembers that are trained to apply them correctly.

6. Finally, I believe we can benefit a lot from intensifying education of travellers and flight attendants combined when it comes to passenger-crewmember interaction and collaboration in the event of a crisis in the skies. Thousands of crewmembers admit that they regard passengers as their first life of defence. The same goes for aviation regulators and politicians, even up to the highest levels. Since this is the case, and in order to avoid over-combativeness but encouraging healthy vigilant behaviour among responsible air travellers, new steps should be taken.

“Effective passenger restraint skills require restraint tools that are safe and effective, and crewmembers that are trained to apply them correctly.”

tion and drunkenness, but also because of the potentially dangerous weapon a bottle is. Once a passenger shows clear signs of intoxication and belligerent behaviour, and has harassed crewmembers as well as co-passengers, you instantly stop serving alcohol. This was not done in time in my case. Finally, if and when a crewmember or passenger has been injured, you protect that person from the assailant at all costs. Protection then truly becomes part of basic human rights and dignity. If you have the manpower, space and necessary tools available, and a passenger has proven his ability to cause serious harm to another individual while continuing to threaten others; you either restrain him, or keep him in his seat by using reliable "guards". If you don't "dare to use" your existing restraining tools, it may be time to question both the efficacy of the tools and the accompanying training.

What type of training do you think can realistically be given to crewmembers?

Since my incident, I have worked with people who lost their loved ones on 9/11, passengers that helped restrain Richard Reid ("the Shoe bomber"), other air rage victims and many of the world's top-shelf aviation safety experts. This combination of sharing, caring and learning has been critical. Some impor-

are likely to win again. Crewmembers need passenger profiling capabilities in order to detect and interpret warning signs early, before incidents escalate to the point where we compromise both personal and flight safety. I have interviewed crewmembers from all major airlines (including Lufthansa), and the feedback about persisting discrepancies will shock the average airline passenger. We must hold the airlines responsible for eventual inadequacies, but simultaneously take positive and collaborative action in order to encourage change.

2. We must align implicit liability issues with today's realities and needs, and make sure crewmembers know them well and receive backing that prevent them from selecting inaction over action where action and intervention are urgently called for. This is conflict and consequence management combined.

3. Many fine crewmembers still struggle with a sense of vulnerability and helplessness because of a lack of verbal diffusion skills, but also due to a general fear of the eventual consequences of having to engage in possible passenger restraints or simply dealing with airborne aggressors. Beyond fine tuning their verbal conflict management capabilities, they therefore need know-how and conflict diffusion skills that can be internalised and put to

How do you feel when you fly today?

Immediately after the assaults I struggled with anxiety. However, with two daughters needing me in Scandinavia and my wife in the USA, I had no choice but to fly. Today, long-haul flights are still very challenging, but mostly due to severe and chronic pain. I decided early on to convert my misadventure into foresight that can help an industry and its customers in a constructive manner. My humble hope is that I can provide input that allows passengers and crewmembers to avoid learning from traumatic hindsight... ■

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